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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000148

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI HOSTS SUB-REGIONAL FGM CONFERENCE,
RATIFIES MAPUTO PROTOCOL

REF: DJIBOUTI 122

1. (U) Summary: Djibouti hosted a sub-regional conference on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) February 2-3 with aims of raising awareness, discussing Islam's view on FGM, and the legal and political implications of the Maputo Protocol. The event was organized as a cooperation between the Government of Djibouti and No Peace Without Justice, along with financing from USAID and Djibouti-based UN agencies. The First Lady of Djibouti and President of the Djiboutian National Women's Union (UNFD), Kadra Mahamoud Haid, Country Representative for the UN Development Program (UNDP), Mbaranga Gasarabwe, and European Union Parliamentarian and founder of No Peace without Justice, Emma Bonino, opened the conference with pleas for zero tolerance of FGM and calls for an end to impunity and ignorance. The First Lady's speech also described FGM as contrary to Islam and asked for a push to promote the improvement of life without distinction between men and women. The conference was attended by high-ranking Islamic authorities from the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region and a large number of the Imams of Djibouti. Government representatives from ten African countries were present: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, Somaliland, Mali, and Senegal. Delegations from Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and the United States were also in attendance. Djibouti ended the conference with the announcement of its ratification of the Maputo Protocol. End Summary.

2. (U) The sub-regional conference on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) held in Djibouti, February 2-3, consisted of two simultaneous sessions: a debate on Islam's position regarding FGM, and the political and legal implementation of the Maputo Protocol. Organizers of the conference chose Islam as a focus due to the frequent use of religion as justification for FGM. In a 2002 study from the Pan Arab Project for Family Health (PAPFAM), it was proved that the majority of women raise religious arguments to perpetuate the tradition of FGM. Djibouti and other Horn of Africa countries practice the most severe form of FGM known as infibulation. A Djiboutian Ministry of Health survey of 1000 women who gave birth at a hospital in Djibouti found that 98 percent of them had suffered FGM. Health experts say this practice is a major contributor to deaths in childbirth and lead to a greater risk to women for HIV infection.

3. (U) The session on Islam's view of FGM was led by Djibouti's Minister of Wafqs and Muslim Affairs, Mogueh Dirir Samatar, and Senior Advisor to the Regional Director of the East Mediterranean Office of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr Khayat. The session was also facilitated by Dr. Darwish, Consultant at the Azhar University of Cairo. During the first day of the session, participants came to the conclusion that no solid sources exist to enforce female circumcision after reviewing religious texts. Religious leaders and conference organizers agreed that Pharaonic circumcision, or infibulation, should be banned. However, the idea of banning all circumcision was heavily protested by the nearly 100 Imams in attendance. The religious leaders struggled to keep Sunna circumcision, or the cutting of a small portion of the clitoris. An agreement the second day of the session concluded that Infibulation would be banned and those practicing it imprisoned, but Sunna circumcision would not be prohibited, providing it was done in a hospital by a qualified surgeon. During the conference's second day, an Italian surgeon resident in the Balbala hospital in Djibouti City showed graphic photographs of women who had suffered FGM, in order to show the religious leaders the consequences of the practice. This action is not something that would normally be shown to religious leaders, a fact that was evident in the averse reaction and refusal to look at the photos by many of the Imams.

4. (U) During the session on Islam, the religious leaders were divided into two camps, those in favor of banning all forms of FGM and those that were unwilling to consider banning any form of FGM. Egypt and Sudan were among those pushing for bans on all forms of FGM, while countries like Djibouti and Ethiopia were adamantly opposed. The Ethiopian representative's speech to the group criticized the western world as trying "to impose its choices on us so that we put aside our values, beliefs and religion. Why don't they stop homosexuality, lesbianism and HIV/AIDS?" The coordinator

called for participants to discuss the topic at hand and not make it a venue for political speeches. However, an Imam from Djibouti continued with the same critiques, urging Islamic countries not to give way to western bad intentions.

15. (U) In a printed statement included in programs handed out to participants, President Guelleh made a firm stand against FGM and called for the abandonment of the practice. He stated: "Concerning what we call Pharaonic circumcision, I want to emphasize that we no longer want it practiced by Arabs, nor by Somalis, nor by Afars, nor in any other form. When we declare: Stop this form of circumcision (pharaonic), this implicitly suggests that we accept the perpetuation of other forms; no female circumcision is justifiable. In truth, we, as men, consider female circumcision as a women's affairs and moreover, the women encourage us in this respect by saying it is an issue exclusively reserved for women. But despite this, we can no longer turn our backs on our responsibility in this specific case. If we accept being kept out of the issue, that says that we condone this act. If you (women) practice this act in ignorance, or continue the tradition, it has been proven that circumcision is not recommended by either the Quran, or the Hadith. Furthermore, our Creator has clearly stated that the Human Being is the most perfect of his creations. We cannot perfect what is already done, so let us abandon this practice."

16. (SBU) Comment: The Government of Djibouti, led by President Guelleh and his wife, has shown a great deal of political will to end FGM practices through this conference and the ratification of the Maputo Protocol. However, for any real change to occur, the Government must educate the general population and be willing to enforce their new commitment through rigorous laws against FGM and stiff penalties for violations. End Comment.

RAGSDALE